

SPOOKED: *Spooks All Round*

Some children have got past the stage of having one fear and are generally fearful, as in the case of Ruth in the last chapter. Some children seem to be born nervous and some are inheriting it from the family Spooks. Parents in this instance find it hard to help their child with the Spooks as the Spooks don't stay in the one place.

Anxiety has a tendency to generalise anyway, which is one reason why it is often wise to treat the childhood Spooks. If you think about the way the Spooks develop, it is clear that Spooks can spread through various areas of life. The child learns to avoid anxiety, and thus builds no tolerance of it. Say the problem begins with Night Spooks. After a year or more of the Night Spooks the child goes to kinder or school and has to face the normal anxiety of new things. Because the child has already begun to use avoidance to control fear, they are more likely to use avoidance to control new fears. They develop another set of Spooks, and then another.

Lucy

Nine year old Lucy had Spooks All Round. She and her mother had similar problems to Ruth and her mother in the last chapter. However, Lucy was also frightened of doctors, dentists and injections. She was also frightened of going to secondary school, and her parents had already begun to enquire for a school that was safe enough for their daughter. She was frightened of a teacher's raised voice, and frightened that when she was older she would be bullied by her peers. Her parents were trying to find a school in which none of this would happen, but the task, which seems impossible to begin with, was made all the harder as the school had to be close to home as Lucy did not want to leave her mother.

Treatment for the Spooks All Round means lifting the child's tolerance of anxiety *in general*. This almost always needs professional help. Parents are trained to help the child identify the problem of low tolerance of fear, and in language the child can follow, alter the child's way of approaching their problem. The parent uses a special kind of Spook Contract which is designed to help the child alter their way of thinking about Spooky Feelings *in general*. The target of the Spooks All Round contract is *a way of thinking*, not any particular behaviour.

Michael

Eight year old Michael was frightened of most things. He had the bedtime Spooks badly, and had also had the kindergarten Spooks. He had fly Spooks, and was too shy to play with his friends, which in his case was peer Spooks. He hated the dentist and the doctor, and collapsed in tears if anyone was cross with him, so he had the anger Spooks as well.

Michael's parents, Jenny and Ian, hated their son to be upset, but had now arrived in an awkward bind. They knew something was wrong, as Michael was unhappy most of the time. He could not get along with his teacher. Michael cried if the teacher was the slightest bit cross. Michael's friends teased him. His parents had a battle to get him to the doctor. Michael's mother and father had been arguing about how to look after him best. Neither of them could tolerate Michael's upset. Jenny had tried to be firmer lately, but Ian kept finding time to have long chats to Michael about how Michael felt, particularly after Jenny had tried ignoring Michael's emotions. This made Ian uncomfortable. Arguments were erupting, such as over the following:

Michael had come home from school upset because the teacher had been cross. Instead of dropping everything she was doing and ringing the school, which is what she had been doing, Jenny had asked Michael what it was that had made the teacher cross. Michael said he didn't know. Jenny was sympathetic but said she supposed that everyone had bad days. She didn't ring the school. When Ian

came home and saw that Michael was still upset, he said Jenny was uncaring and disappeared with Michael into Michael's room for an hour long heart to heart. Jenny was angry. It was hard for her to resist trying to make Michael feel better, and now Ian had done what she had with great effort resisted doing.

When Jenny, Ian and Michael came for help, they needed to understand the changes they had to make as well as the changes they had to help Michael make. Like so many conscientious parents, they had their goals set on how to make Michael feel better rather than how to help Michael learn those things which would enable him to grow up healthy and happy. Although Jenny had begun to see the way out, she was confused and unlikely to go through with her new behaviours without help, and even if she had, she would then have had to deal with Ian's discomfort.

Goal setting when children have the Spooks

When children have the Spooks All Round, the way parents set their own goals as parents becomes critical. Nearly all parents that seek help are concerned, conscientious and loving parents. In part, they have got themselves into trouble simply because of these characteristics. They find it hard to step back from the child's immediate experiences and ask themselves what the child needs to learn in order to grow up healthy and happy.

The answer to this when the child has Spooks All Round, is that parents need to help the child recognise and alter scary thinking.

Michael's Spook Contract

Michael and his parents were introduced to the idea of scary thoughts, which make scary feelings. A chart was drawn, with Michael's idea of what a scary thought and a scary feeling might look like. Underneath this drawing we wrote down the kind of scary thoughts Michael got during an ordinary day. On the other side of the chart was a picture of a *Real* thought, that is, a thought which was based on what was happening, and not on fear itself.

* A Scary Thought is fear in disguise

* A Real Thought is based on what is actually happening or likely to happen.

Some examples of real and scary thoughts from Michael's chart can be seen in the (opposite page - need an illustration here)

Awfulising

Michael often made his fears worse by labelling the things that happened to him *awful* rather than thinking about them more clearly. Children are prone to thinking about some things as *awful*. By this they mean that the awful thing is so bad that it must be avoided at all costs. Some adults think like this as well, and adults who think like this also suffer more anxiety than perhaps they otherwise would. A child might say that it would be *awful* if their friend stopped liking them. They feel like it would be the end of the world. It would be unpleasant, no doubt. But definitely not the end of the world. The word awful brings our thinking to a dead end, and fears set in easily at this point.

In managing fears it is important to keep thinking about what would really happen if the friend stopped liking you, rather than acting as if it is the end of the world. Awfulising is one example of scary thinking. Real thoughts might not be pleasant, but they don't make you feel as if the end of the world has just

arrived.

Example:

Scary Thoughts are:

If the teacher gets cross with me it will be AWFUL

The teacher should not get cross with me

I could never put up with having an injection - its too scary

If I go to the party other kids might tease me and that would be AWFUL.

Feeling scared is AWFUL

Real Thoughts are:

I do not like the teacher being cross but people sometimes are cross and I can think about what she is saying to me.

The teacher will sometimes get cross.

Nothing much happens to me when the teacher is cross

I would like one day to be able to have injections without feeling so terrified.

I will feel sad and angry if kids tease me, but I could probably do some things differently myself to help stop this happening.

Feeling scared is very uncomfortable. It passes.

Michael and his parents kept this chart on the refrigerator for about a week, collecting scary thoughts and changing them to real thoughts. They discovered what most parents of children with Spooks All Round discover - Michael's day was full of Scary Thoughts - it was the way he thought. Also, it was often the way *they* thought, and they had not realised it. Some of Jenny and Ian's scary thoughts were:

If Michael feels scared there is something wrong with him.

Unless our son is happy he will be a depressed adolescent and might take drugs or kill himself

If our son is sad it must mean we are bad parents

Children should be happy

The important point for Michael was that as he found out about real thoughts and scary thoughts he found that the Spooks could be helped by thinking real thoughts. Jenny and Ian found that they did a better job of helping Michael learn how to cope by thinking real thoughts. They stopped trying to make him feel better and started helping him think in healthy ways. Can you think of the Real thoughts which would have helped Michael's parents parent better?

Michael was also given a short relaxation tape to help manage the Spooks.

Relaxation for Children

Relaxation is a popular tool in the treatment of adult anxieties. Anxiety and fear, as already pointed out, trigger the red alert system of the body - the fight flight reflex. Relaxation turns off this system. The fight flight reflex comes on semi automatically, but it is quite possible to learn how to turn it off.

An adult who suffers from anxiety when sitting in a theatre, for example, is in the very uncomfortable situation of having their fight flight reflex turned on in the middle of the performance. Most people so affected start to panic further because of the context - they feel they are unable to move even if they want to. Treating this problem involves training the person in good relaxation, which means helping them acquire the ability to turn off the fight flight reflex. This is what relaxation therapy is all about, to give the person control back over the things their body does.

Teaching this to children however, is not as reliable as teaching it to adults. This is why I only use it when the child has Spooks All Round, or sometimes, the nighttime Spooks. To use relaxation, one has to have the ability to step outside one's current uncomfortable experience. Adrenaline racing through the system creates very unpleasant feelings, and adults are taught to relax, which turns off the emergency system, and then tolerate the time in between relaxing the body and the adrenaline levels coming down. There is always an uncomfortable gap between turning off the fight flight reflex and the body returning to a relaxed state. Adults who do not understand this do not learn to master anxiety and turn off the fight flight reflex.

Adults achieve this reasonably easily. But they have the ability to step outside of their current experience and wait for the body to slow down. This capacity to step outside one's current feelings is not well developed in children. Children find tolerating the feelings of the moment harder. Children of 8 or 9 and older may manage this with skilled help. Younger children are unlikely to do so. Younger children *may* respond to tapes of their parents reading their favourite stories at night as part of treatment for nighttime Spooks. They are unlikely to be able to use relaxation tapes, except as a source of comfort in hearing someone else's voice.

Michael *was* taught how to relax and slow his body down, and had some success in learning that the fight flight reflex could be controlled, rather than have it controlling him. This however, usually takes some professional help.

The Good Parent Contract

When Michael and his parents had got used to scary and real thoughts, they began to work on helping Michael keep to real thoughts. After a week practising they had all become quite good at recognising scary thoughts and the parents were instructed, with Michael present, *never* to act on scary thoughts, as acting as if scary thoughts are real makes them bigger and harder to handle. The parents were given their own chart for the fridge, called a *Good Parent Contract*. On this chart was drawn a picture of a scary thoughts being shrunk. Michael was shown this, and told that it was his parents job never to act on a scary thoughts. There was one exception to this, and that was Michael's bedtime Spooks. He had a separate Spook Contract for that, worked out in the usual way.

Treating children with Spooks All Round needs a lot of care. It is useless to expose the child to fear without the proper support, but the child with Spooks All Round has so many Spooks that trying to fit them all into an ordinary Spook Contract is useless. Targeting scary thoughts and changing them into real thoughts does work well, but parents *must* be prepared to help correct their child's thinking patiently and consistently, with a little bit of humour if this helps. A Good Parent Contract makes it clear to the child that the parents are going to do only what is best for the child, and it makes it clear to the parents

what this is. The goal of the Good Parent Contract is to encourage those abilities which the *child needs* to be well and happy - not to make the child feel better in the short term or continue avoiding and being controlled by, his fears.

One of the key methods parents of children with Spooks All Round are taught is *reframing*, which is often used when parents are sticking to their Good Parent Contracts.

Reframing

It is important to provide a frightened child with the experience that his feelings are *understood* even if it is also the case that parents do not act on his fears and thus help him avoid them. Reframing is used for just this purpose - to help parents stick to the task of helping the child identify and master the problem.

Let us take the case of Michael, above. He suddenly has a scary thought that the teacher may yell at him as some of his homework may be wrong, and he bursts into tears. His mother in the past would have acted on his fears. She would have done one of the following:

1. Rung the teacher to let her know how upset Michael was so that she would take extra care.
2. Done Michael's homework for him.
3. Let him stay home so he could do it again.

But now she is on her Good Parent Contract, she is not allowed to do anything else but help Michael identify and change the scary thought. She says:

I think you have a scary thought telling you that you cannot cope with having some homework wrong and the teacher asking you to do it again. I can see that it is making you very upset - (she stops and puts her arm around him and gives him a cuddle) and I hope you can shrink that scary thought soon. How do you think you could shrink it?

In reframing the parent *clarifies* the scary thought calmly, and often provides the child with *comfort* - after all - he is scared. However, at no point does the parent take the task of mastering the Spooks away from the child - the child is *encouraged* to shrink the thought, and to think real not scary thoughts. The parent stays focussed on this, but recognises that it is something only the child can decide to do.

Even if the going gets tough - perhaps Michael isn't in the mood to shrink this scary thought - mother stays focussed on her task. Michael cries louder and demands to stay home. Mother, sticking doggedly to her Good Parent Contract, says:

I'm sorry you feel bad. I hope you do manage to shrink this one, but I have to take you to school and I'm not allowed to obey your scary thoughts as that is not good for you.

There is a big difference between *reassurance*, which is what parents often try to do in situations like this, and *reframing*. Reassurance is fine if the child has not got the Spooks - it just doesn't work if they have. Reassurance is when the parent tries to make the child feel better. In the above example, if mother was trying to reassure Michael, she would say:

You'll be alright. Now come on, cheer up, don't be so scared - it'll be OK.

This is fine if children aren't Spooked, but if they are Spooked, the child generally can't respond to this

kind of comment. With reframing, the parent makes it clear that only the child can decide what to do with the feeling, and that all the parent can do is assist. Parents illuminate the choices the child has, and encourage the child to make the choice, but they do not attempt to do it *for the child*, and wait for the child to take this step themselves.

Although reframing is a central technique for treating the Spooks All Round, it can be used in treating specific Spooks. For instance, it is sometimes used in the kindergarten Spooks, which as already mentioned earlier, can be quite hard for a young child. This is one other area of Spooks which responds well to reframing. Instead of saying:

You'll be perfectly OK, now stop crying and mummy will be back later.

Which is an attempt to reassure and try to make decisions about the Spooks for the child, the parent says:

I can it's hard for you to feel OK saying goodbye to mummy, and I hope you can put the bad feelings away soon and enjoy your day.

In the latter comment the parent does not try to avoid the child's discomfort, but is able to tolerate the child's Spooks, give some accurate feedback about what the child is feeling, and by their own calm manner (which is sometimes bluff!) also model the way of managing these difficult moments without trying to do it for the child. This reframing of the feelings puts the feelings in context of the adult's understanding of the world, rather than leaving the child stuck in Spook mode with terrifying feelings.

It is important for parents to take a realistic attitude to the retraining of the thinking and not expect the child to change it overnight. Nor can the parent break the Good Parent Contract and act on the child's fears. This can lead to some occasional teary times in the treatment of Spooks All Round, and the child can be offered a cuddle when the going gets tough. Its OK to cuddle children when they are scared. It is not OK to obey them, and do what they demand.

Rewards and Good Parent Contracts

Treatment of the Spooks All Round does not require rewards. The parents simply *refuse to act* on the child's scary thoughts, and always use reframing. Rewards are most easily used on specific target behaviours, as in chapter 5. Getting the child to think in healthy ways - and making sure parents are thinking in healthy ways - can proceed without rewards, and trying to use rewards can get difficult, because of the global, nonspecific nature of the task.

As it happened, like so many children with the Spooks, Michael was keen to feel OK. He learned to recognise and shrink the scary thoughts, and his parents offered him an attractive set of rewards - just things he liked such as bike riding and games together, plus a late bedtime on the weekend. He learned to master his scary thinking, and has now, as an older child, has left all his Spooks behind him - where they belong.

Feelings Spooks

A variant of Spooks All Round, needing the same kind of treatment, is the Feelings Spooks. This is actually two Spooks, the Anger Spooks and the Sadness Spooks.

Sandy

Sandy, who was 12, had a tendency to burst into tears when she had to talk about anything which made her feel sad or uncomfortable. The original cause of this may have been the result of a prolonged

hospitalisation for a painful condition when Sandy was young. Whatever the original cause of this, she had, by 12 years old, a distressing habit of bursting into tears many times a day. In her first session with me, she did this about 18 times within the hour. Her tolerance of any emotional discomfort was very low. If she did experience a problem, and she had a problem with a friend of hers when she came to see me, her ability to tolerate the feelings of sadness was very low.

Although the symptom of Sandy's low tolerance was striking, it was clearly an anxiety response to sadness itself. This was partly the result of her mother's anxiety. Her mother, Anne, was worried about her daughter. Whenever Sandy got upset, mother's fears about how her daughter was going to cope when older set in, and she became afraid of her daughter's feelings. I suggested to Sandy and her mother that we try a contract for Spooks All Round, which meant that Sandy and her family had to practise telling the difference between scary thoughts and real thoughts, and then her parents would have to go on a Good Parent Contract, to never act on Sandy's scary thoughts. Instead she was taught reframing.

Sandy had also started to develop other Spooks. Sometimes children prone to the Feelings Spooks develop habits such as compulsive handwashing or other repetitive ritual behaviours which help them manage their Spooky feelings. Sandy had begun to wash her hands after doing anything at all. Her fear was that she would have germs on her hands. This fear was also included in her scary thoughts chart, and this was one of the scary thoughts which she had to alter.

Sandy's scary thoughts and real thoughts, along with Anne's, can be seen in Table 5.

After only five sessions with Sandy and her mother, Sandy's tears had stopped and her handwashing had returned to normal. Again, Sandy, like most children stuck with the Spooks are only too keen to get unstuck if someone helps them see how to do it. Sandy had practised shrinking her scary thoughts and her mother had stuck to her Good Parent Contract. When Sandy had started to cry, her mother had said:

I can see there is something you would like to talk about. I hope you can get to the thing you would like to talk about and not feel so bad. When you want to give it a go, let me know and we can talk.

This was very different to mother's previous response. Sandy's mother had been, understandably, very worried about her daughter, and had been quite unable to step back and encourage Sandy to manage her sadness. She had been saying things like:

Tell me why you feel this way. I don't know why you have to cry so much! Now just what is the matter - I'll go and tell your girlfriend what I think of her (mother had actually done just that) - and I'm not going to put up with this.....

Mother had been *escalating* her daughter's anxiety - which means joining in and making it worse. Worried parents tend to do this. When she was helped to stop doing this, using a Good Parent Contract to keep her focussed on what really helped her child, things improved.

If the child is suffering Spooks All Round, generally everyone on the family feels very confused about how to look after the child and how to help the child become more comfortable. Professional help is often needed as the parent, in an attempt to help the child feel better is almost always helping the child avoid fearful situations or losing their tempers in anxiety themselves. It is also important that the child see their parents actions in stepping back from the Spooks as their parents doing the best thing for them. The change some parents have to make are quite dramatic, and a psychologist is able to establish these changes in a way the child is able to understand, without the child feeling deserted.

Serious Spooks

Some serious childhood illnesses, such as autism in its various forms, are heralded by avoidance of anxiety and fearful behaviours. These cannot be treated by Spook Contracts. Often ritualist behaviours and severe avoidance sets in at an early age, and the child's behaviour is clearly self absorbed and ritualised. Sometimes there is a great fear of any change in routine or in the environment at all. These behaviours are not indicative of the Spooks and cannot be treated by the methods outlined here. The same thing applies to severe cases of obsessive compulsive behaviours in childhood and adolescence. The onset of anxiety in adolescence should always be assessed professionally before any treatment attempted.

Siblings?

God Parent Contracts have one final use. The use of rewards often provokes comment from siblings - along the lines of why they cannot have the rewards. When the rewards are a matter of earning the normal things back again, siblings have little problem with this. When it is a matter of getting extras, siblings may comment. A general rule of thumb is got from the Good Parent Contract. Parents provide children with what they need to grow up healthy and happy. Thus the Good Parent will coach a child through the management of fears and use rewards if this is in the best interest of the child. Once a parent begins to give the sibling gifts to make the situation fair, the parent is acting on the assumption that fairness means giving both children the same. It is much safer as a parent to act on the principle that a Good Parent will give each child what is good for them to have. It is not a good thing to teach a child that they must have the same to be loved the same, and a much better thing to let the child know that their needs will always be taken care of by the parent in the same way as they are currently taking care of the Spooked sibling. Children are different, and their needs are never exactly the same.